

Side

Brown

The blues runs through **Van Morrison's** *Too Long In Exile* (Polydor), even on the songs that aren't blues. Around the end of the '70s, Morrison abandoned rock and all its trappings, and went off to make his own music. That music which filled every Morrison album since with the possible exception of his collaboration with the Chieftains, *Irish Heartbeat*, drew on all of his influences, R and B, jazz, country, but decidedly and deliberately did not rock. *Too Long In Exile* signifies a change. It may not exactly rock, but it is his funkier album in well over a decade.

That funkiness is more than apparent on the second track "Big Time Operators," a music business put-down with a sound that goes right back to his first solo album *Blowin' Your Mind*. Morrison continues that organ-driven sound on the first of several covers, Doc Pomus' "Lonely Avenue" featuring a wild harmonica solo.

"Ball & Chain" revisits the feel and sound of Morrison's mid-'70s albums. This song is the closest to pop and rock he's come in years and his vocal reinforces his commitment.

"In the Forest," echoes his '80s work. A master of repetition, this ballad, mirrors several he's done in the past, almost as if he's forever trying to capture and perfect the vision in his mind. Its companion piece, "Till We Get the Healing Done," also covers past themes of spirituality and satisfaction, but the music again draws on the blues for its power, where a few years ago the ambiance would have been ethereal.

A reworked "Gloria," is sung with John Lee Hooker providing a typically spooky vocal. More than any of the hordes of musicians who have worked with Hooker in the recent past, Morrison who credits Hooker as one of his chief influences, instinctively understands what Hooker's about. This version doesn't have the garage feel of the original, but still kicks in a different manner.

Morrison digs into the blues even deeper on Sonny Boy Williamson's "Good Morning Little Schoolgirl." Morrison respects the blues too much to mess with it, but there's a sense of abandon in his singing and harp playing, and actually sounds like he's having fun.

Hooker returns for "Wasted Years," a blues in the sense that Morrison's classic "Cypress Avenue" was a blues. It continues the album's general theme of someone waking up to realize who he is. (Wonder if he's talking about Scientology when he sings, "Wasted years, I was taking the wrong advice.")

Morrison then swings into his other love, jazz, for swinging but funky covers of "The Lonesome Road" and "Moody's Mood for Love," and an original instrumental "Close Enough for Jazz," leading into a jazzy adaptation of a Yeats poem, "Before the World Was Made."

The album closes with an extended dark and deep medley, starting with Brook Benton's "I'll Take Care of You," which leads into a minor blues instrumental titled "Instrumental," followed by a growling "Tell Me What You Want."

Throughout the singing is prime Morrison, which is of course, as good as you can get. I think time will prove this to be a transitional record, and more than anything this album makes me eager and interested to see what he does next.

Paul Westerberg starts off his first solo album *14 Songs* (Sire/Reprise) with "Knockin' On Mine," a song so initially grungy it could've been a Replacements song, except about halfway through, you suddenly realize it's

not so grungy after all, with a neat little mandolin lick, an instrument the Replacements probably would never have considered.

Westerberg's new songs aren't all that different from Replacements songs, but the album is free of the tension that marked the group. His songs flow naturally whether writing put-down rockers like "World Class Fad" or remarkably pretty, personal reminisces like "First Glimmer."

Instead of going for a big production job with big-name session musicians, Westerberg chose to work with a small group of musicians playing all the guitars himself, and even (wisely) including a demo recorded in his kitchen of "Black Eyed Susan."

"Runaway Wind" represents a new maturity, both in melodic composition and that Westerberg is using his limited vocal chops to really sing. "Even Here We Are," a snatch of a song running less than two minutes is done simply with acoustic finger-picked guitar and barely audible bass.

When he follows that with a roaring Stones-like rocker "Silver Naked Ladies," it makes perfect sense.

In fact, the whole album makes sense, whether its the earnest pleading "Things," the crazed rocking "Something Is Me," or the catchy "Mannequin Shop."

14 Songs may not initially overwhelm you, but a few listens will confirm that it's a solid, thoroughly unpretentious and quite likable album.

Chris Smither celebrates the release of his new album *Happier Blue* (Flying Fish) Thursday at the Tin Angel. Backed by a small group featuring Robin Batteau on violin, the original title track, somewhat reminiscent of Dylan's "Buckets of Rain" is the standout. Smither misses the inherent funkiness of John Hiatt's "Memphis in the Meantime" and Lowell George's "Rock 'n' Roll Doctor" though the latter is graced with remarkable finger-picking. He turns the traditional "Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos" into a pointless sax-driven blues. To hear how the song really goes (and should be sung, check out the Band's version on the *Basement Tapes*). His own "Mail Order Mystics," which "Brazos" leads into is much better.

When Smither stays with country blues or something reasonably close as on the beautiful, dreamy "No Reward" or the upbeat "Already Gone," the result is quite pleasurable as is Rolly Salley's "Killin' the Blues" and J.J. Cale's "Magnolia." Those songs make the album and the show worth checking out.

Take rockabilly to its most insane conclusion and you come up with the **Reverend Horton Heat** who brings his psychobilly sounds to the comfortable suburb of Ardmere at the 23 East Friday. The Reverend who doesn't believe in God, has a new album, *The Full Custom Gospel Sounds of ...* (Sub Pop) where he's backed by his band, Taz drums, and Jimbo bass. Heat plays the guitar. Actually he drives the guitar at about 90 million miles an hour. Check out "400 Bucks," "Livin' On the Edge (of Houston)" or "You Can't Get Away From Me" for a good idea of his playing.

To put it quite simply, Heat is everything that rock 'n' roll once was and should have been all along: outrageous, funny and when you think he can't take it any further, he finds a way, achieving perhaps the ultimate train beat on "Lonesome Train," and guaranteeing that he won't get on country radio with "Bales of Cocaine." The **Friggs** open.